

CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH

4TH DISTRICT, NEW JERSEY

CONSTITUENT SERVICE CENTERS:

MONMOUTH
112 Village Center Drive
Freehold, NJ 07728-2510
(732) 780-3035

OCEAN
405 Route 539
Plumsted, NJ 08514-2303
(609) 286-2571; (732) 350-2300

MERCER
4573 South Broad Street
Hamilton, NJ 08620-2215
(609) 585-7878

2373 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-3004
(202) 225-3765

<http://chrissmith.house.gov>



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

SENIOR MEMBER, FOREIGN AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE

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GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS, AND
INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE

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AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

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COMMISSION ON CHINA

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Human Rights Abuses and Crimes Against Humanity in North Korea

*Excerpts of Remarks
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights, and Int'l Organizations
U.S. Rep. Chris Smith, Chairman
June 18, 2014*

Today's hearing is one that deserves the world's attention: the systematic abuses of human rights in North Korea, which amount to crimes against humanity by perhaps the world's most repressive totalitarian regime – and *totalitarian*, not authoritarian, is the right word. As so very correctly stated in the United Nations Commission of Inquiry report on North Korea, such a regime is “a state that does not content itself with ensuring the authoritarian rule of a small group of people, but seeks to dominate every aspect of its citizens' lives and terrorizes them from within.”

For in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, we see a State that seeks to control all aspects of the lives of its citizens, not only their political lives, but also that innermost sanctuary we call conscience as well.

The term “hermit kingdom” is applied to any nation that willfully cuts itself off from the rest of the world – either metaphorically or physically. This term was applied to Korea as long ago as the late nineteenth century, but it continues to be applicable to North Korea today. This is why the terrible human rights violations in North Korea are little noticed outside foreign policy circles. We must see that the crimes of the North Korean regime are more widely known than they are now.

The first step toward that is one that we hope to do here today – to call experts to present testimony on the horrific situation in North Korea, where political prisoners serve as virtual slaves, where starvation is used as a political weapon, and where religious believers – Christians in particular – are imprisoned, tortured and killed with such ferocity that some say it amounts to genocide.

Unfortunately, however, today the world's attention is distracted by manifold crises which seem almost to overwhelm us. To enumerate just a few, there is the:

- breathtaking collapse-in-progress of the Maliki regime in Iraq, which we had supported at the cost of so much American blood and treasure;
- various humanitarian catastrophes in Africa, most notably in the Central African Republic and South Sudan, but also the presence of violent Islamist movements such as Boko Haram and al-Shabaab in the major nations of Nigeria and Kenya;
- the ongoing tensions in Ukraine, as a restive Russia seeks to reassert its imperial hegemony over neighboring states; and
- clashes in the South China Sea as an increasingly-belllicose China makes a gambit to become a maritime power and fill a perceived vacuum.

We have always lived in a wounded world, but today the tourniquets required to stop all the bleeding the world over would tax even the most compassionate of souls.

Yet it is precisely this exhaustion of compassion that we must fight against, and we must summon the necessary conviction to address the sufferings of the people of North Korea.

We will have testifying today an eyewitness to the barbarity of North Korea's cruel regime – a defector from North Korea who was born in a "total-control zone" political prison camp in the North, and who will give us an unsettling first-hand account of what he experienced. The torture he endured – and not simply physical torture, as horrific as that was – was a psychological barbarity of such ruthlessness that once you have heard what he underwent, your imaginations will forever be affected.

Members of this Subcommittee are no strangers to the brutal reality of starvation in many parts of the world, particularly in Africa. But today they will hear stories of starvation by design – how the denial of food is used as an instrument of wide scale torture.

We will hear also about a North Korean nuclear program that goes beyond the headlines. Yes, we do know that North Korea, in its quest for nuclear weapons, threatens to destabilize the world, but what many of us did not know, and what we will hear about today, is the extent to which the North Korean nuclear program is built upon the cadavers of its own people. The United Nations Commission of Inquiry report, as important as it was, never explored the full extent to which workers in uranium mines are exposed to high levels of radiation, and how even the most basic concern for the safety needs of workers are routinely ignored.

Finally, I want to call attention to H.R. 1771, the North Korea Sanctions Enforcement Act. It is my hope that Congress – both the House and Senate – will take to heart the testimony that is presented today, and, with a renewed focus on North Korea's human rights record, pass this important legislation, which takes a step toward holding this rouge regime accountable for the sins committed against its own people.